



Global walk North Atlantic drifts

The island of Newfoundland is Canada's easternmost point, whose coastline is a stunning wilderness of forested peninsulas and stormy inlets. Fifteen years in the making, the East Coast Trail aims to showcase these natural riches to hikers from around the world, with new stretches opening every year. We discover the extraordinary sights along the latest addition to the trail – just don't mention whales or icebergs...

WORDS: Dominic Bates

"My god, look at the size of these!" My guide, Forrest, cuts himself off mid-sentence and is – for the umpteenth time – bent double in the undergrowth. "I just can't walk past them when they're this big," he muffles by way of apology, mouth full to bursting.

He's right. The blueberries are the size of rich women's pearls and the most delicious I've ever tasted. And they're everywhere along this narrow clifftop track, mingling with an astonishing array of other fulsome, edible berries, including black, cran, partridge and cracking (which, satisfyingly, do exactly that when you chomp down on their red flesh).

I'm supposed to be walking my first day-long section of the East Coast Trail, Newfoundland's first (and only) long-distance path. But at this rate, I'll have walked no further than the first bay come lunchtime and be waylaid with a bad case of what Forrest indelicately calls "the Blue Danube" for the rest of the afternoon. The trail is still a work in progress after 15 years and comprises a multitude of individual hiking routes along the entire Atlantic seaboard of the Canadian island. The ambitious aim is eventually to link them all together into a continuous whole, with waymarks, dedicated maps and facilities to compete with the world's very best multi-day hikes.

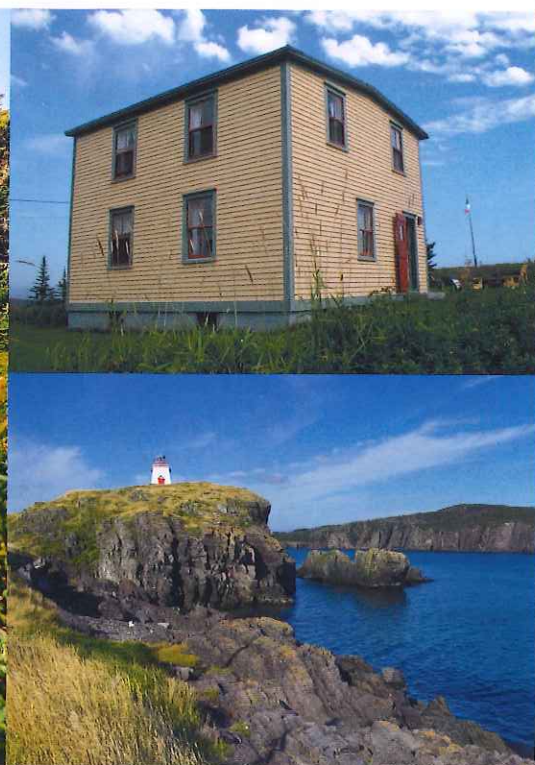
The breathtaking cliff-lined coastline on the Skerwink Trail near Trinity on the Bonavista Peninsula

walk it!

TIME/DISTANCE: The 15km Stiles Cove Path, from Pouch Cove to Flatrock, takes five to seven hours. Maps are available from various outdoors stores in St John's or from the website below. The 5.3km Skerwink Trail takes no more than a couple of hours (see www.theskerwinktrail.com for full details).

TRAVEL TO/AROUND: Air Transat will fly from Gatwick next summer, from £448pp return (www.airtransat.co.uk). Air Canada operates daily flights from Heathrow to St John's during the summer (www.aircanada.com). Travel around the peninsula is best by hire car from the airport.

FURTHER INFO: www.eastcoasttrail.ca; www.atlanticcanadaholiday.co.uk



“After the gentle start at Pouch Cove, the coastal scenery becomes increasingly dramatic and we stop several times to admire yet another waterfall crashing down the sheer cliff face to the swell below

Spruce, moose and oil money

With blue-stained lips and fingernails, we finally get our walk properly under way. The 15km stretch ahead of us, from Pouch Cove to Flatrock, is just a few miles north of Newfoundland's capital, St John's, and is well known to Forrest. He's one of the many volunteer trail guardians who have helped build and maintain this latest new section, and every time we cross a boardwalk with a loose strut or an overgrown patch, I can hear him making a mental note.

We scale the first of many rocky outcrops, playing peek-a-boo with the ocean through glades of dense Newfoundland spruce. The island's native variety is slower-growing and more erratic than the perfectly symmetrical Nova Scotia spruce (the first choice for America's Christmas trees), which is probably why so much is left to grow unfelled on the Crown land that makes up 95% of the province. But it was precisely these idiosyncrasies that once made the spruce so highly desirable to the first western settlers along this coastline. Forrest points out oddly shaped boughs that would have been earmarked as perfect for a boat's tiller or a mainsail. Shielded from the winds in one cleft along the clifftop, the spruce grows arrow-straight and almost bare of any branches. “These would have been used for making fencing round their fields,” says Forrest.

Newfoundlanders of yore had to be resourceful in these tough, isolated conditions, and most rotated their labours between fishing, working the forests for timber and sealing in the winter months. This versatility seems to have survived the generations. Forrest is typical of the many locals I meet, working at numerous jobs throughout the year and being a

dab hand at hunting, bushcraft, cross-country skiing, sea-kayaking and boat-building. But he's not as skilled as his dad, he says, who “could put the arse into a cat”.

After working our way down and out of another steeply wooded creek – many of which used to harbour a fisherman's ramshackle wharf and hut – we stop for lunch on a treeless bluff overlooking the vast, white-capped expanse of the North Atlantic. Ravens casually ride the updrafts from the cliff edge, while gannets dart with spectacular speed into the surf.

“A few weeks ago you'd have seen icebergs and whales making their way south,” says Forrest. After a freakishly hot July, the seas warmed earlier this year, sending the crill and their giant predators on migration earlier than usual, and launching an armada of breakaways from the ice shelf. “It was probably our best iceberg season ever,” he says on reflection, and suddenly the ocean views don't seem so impressive anymore.

I can't stay deflated for long, though. Forrest's rags-to-riches tales of his grandfather arriving in Newfoundland shortly after World War Two (he died a millionaire after founding a chain of grocery stores in St John's) soon recapture my imagination as well as my curiosity. Quite unlike mainland Canadians, Forrest talks with an accent that's foreign yet charmingly familiar. Then it finally clicks. They're the pacy, slurry vowels of a Dubliner with an American twang – not surprising, given the mass immigration here from Ireland in the 19th century. And like the Irish, Newfoundlanders can talk the hind legs off a moose.

Forrest continues the family stories walking, and the going underfoot becomes surprisingly varied and challenging. There are tree roots, smooth slabs,

stepping stones through mires and more steep enclaves to negotiate. After the gentle start at Pouch Cove, the coastal scenery becomes increasingly dramatic and we stop several times to admire yet another waterfall crashing down the sheer cliff face into the swell below. More and more daytrippers from the city pass us by as we near Flatrock, but the wildlife still abounds round every corner. A shrew dashes across our path, prehistoric-sized dragonflies hover in the sunny glades, and a mink scurries over the rocks of a secluded cove. We don't manage to spot one of the half a million moose that roam the island, but the freshly chewed tops of their favourite young spruces suggest one isn't far away.

On two occasions, the scar of mechanised diggers suddenly breaks the tree cover and our route on the ground. As North America's most easterly point, St John's has always been strategically important, with numerous batteries and armoured lookouts surviving from World War Two and much earlier conflicts. But now its proximity to the Arctic Circle has made it the key staging post for a new oil rush. The money flooding into the city is a welcome boon to an economy that collapsed with the fish stocks, after a moratorium on cod fishing in the 1980s. Swish restaurants and fancy cars are now a familiar sight in downtown St John's, but the new foreign elite also wants to buy a slice of the spectacular Atlantic views for their out-of-town condos. For the first time, Newfoundlanders are encountering landowners who don't recognise the province's age-old convention of general public access, and Forrest tells me the East Coast Trail developers are working hard to solve each issue as it arises.

For the last few kilometres, we find ourselves under attack from another new resident, who's possibly even more vociferously protective of

this wooded coastline than the trail's guardians. At almost every copse we enter, we're greeted with an aggressive chatter from the treetops that follows us until we're out the other side.

“Tree rats,” says Forrest, whose genuine love of nature is tempered by a hunter's unsentimentality. One darts down the trunk of a tree and glares furiously at me from a branch a foot above my head, and I'm startled to see it's a red squirrel. They were introduced to the island as family pets by fishermen a century ago, and they're not at all like the timid, shy little things besieged by greys in the UK. They're fiercely territorial little brutes, and their shrill call is still ringing in my ears as the picturesque clapboard town of Flatrock finally hoves into view.

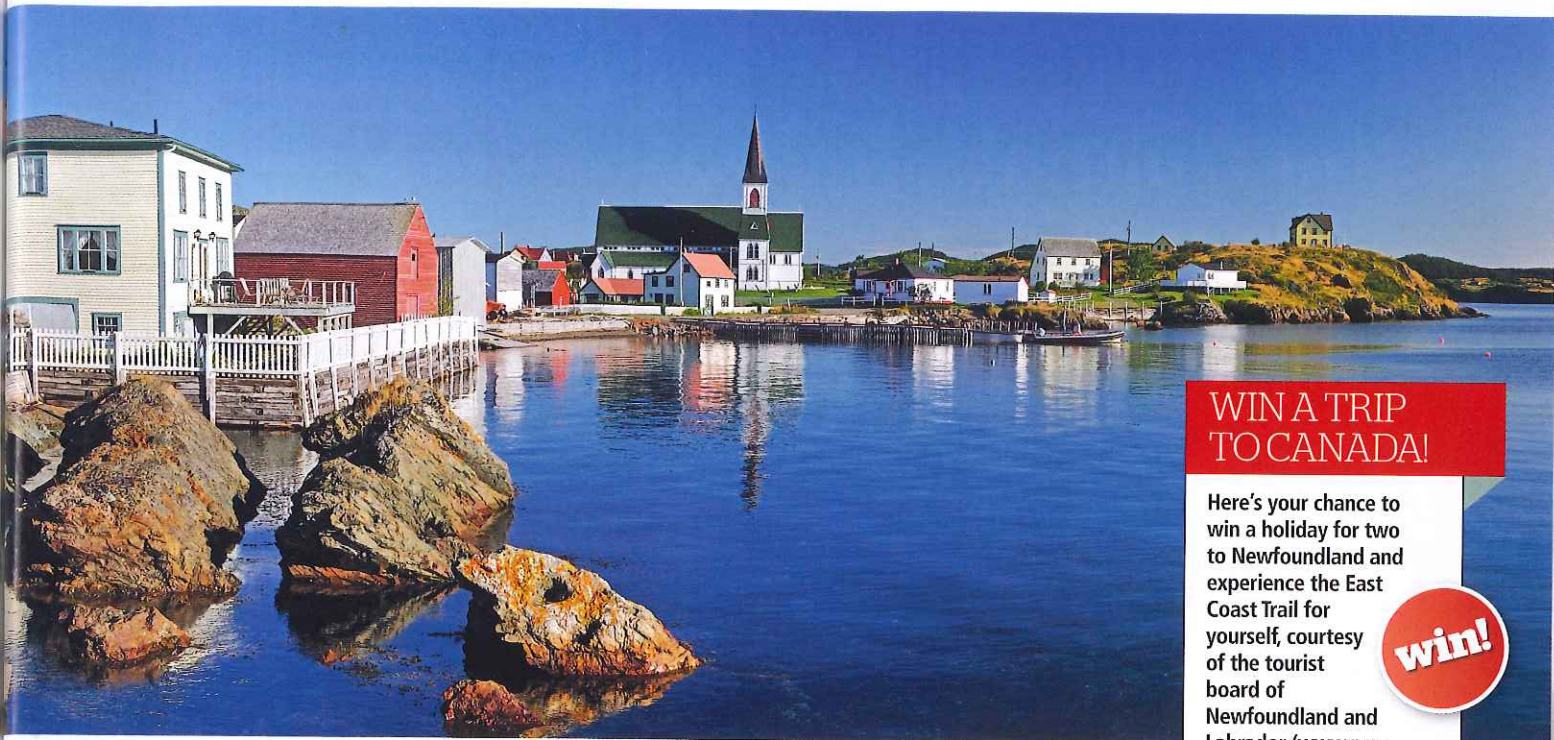
Bald eagles and Kevin Spacey

Three hours of winding coastal drive north, I'm on the Bonavista Peninsula, where explorer John Cabot is said to have landed in 1497, claiming Newfoundland for the King of England. Now a honeypot for tourists drawn to its stunning landscape and history-rich towns, it's also got the province's highest profile trek. Local motel owner John Vivian created the Skerwink Trail 15 years ago, hacking a path through thick bush and bog to a clifftop summit, where he knew there'd be spectacular views, having scouted out the spot from down below in his boat. It's gone on to become the benchmark by which all other hikes in Newfoundland – and, indeed, the entire East Coast Trail project – are judged.

At just 5.3km, it's really a well-manicured tourist loop. But what a loop it is. The amount of variety packed into every few yards is astonishing. Gnarled and twisted woods, shaped by decades of strong winds, lead you out onto exposed ►



Clockwise from top left: A wooden walkway through the forest and bogs on the Skerwink Trail, Newfoundland; the dense rows of native Newfoundland spruce in Pouch Cove; taking in the clifftop views at Port Rexton; a restored turn-of-the-century clapboard house in Trinity; a lighthouse perched on a rocky headland near Trinity, Newfoundland; the glut of deliciously plump blueberries in Pouch Cove



The tranquil setting of the Artisan Inn at Trinity

headlands, where sea stacks drop 80ft into washing-machine waters. Then an inland forest path takes you from a hilltop lookout down to a sheltered bay, before following the edges of a tranquil reedbed lake, passing rolling farmer's fields back to the start.

An international travel magazine has hailed it as one of the best walks in North America and Europe, and gawping at the panorama from the lookout with John, I can see why. The never-ending views out to sea are dreamy, while the countless hills and coastal inlets of the peninsula are a real-life map whose contours you could study for hours. Above us, I watch the impressive wingspan and stark white head of a bald eagle soar out of sight.

"There were so many whales here a few weeks ago, one lady listened to a pod of more than 12 right whales breaching below the cliffs before the morning mists finally lifted and she could see them," says John, bringing me back down to earth with a bump. Before he can mention the icebergs, I moan that I've already heard it was the best year ever for them. He nods sympathetically.

Below us, the pristine town of Trinity is arranged like a toy village around a gorgeous natural harbour, where a lighthouse sounds its horn. "Churchill had a contingency plan in World War Two for the navy to retreat here should Britain fall to the Nazis, then regroup and attempt a liberation," says John.

Thank goodness it never came to that, because the British Bulldog might have struggled to get his troops to leave. Trinity's hundred or so turn-of-the-century, clapboard houses are immaculately restored, together with two working forges, a chocolatier, artists' studios and a wharfside restaurant. The day I arrive, two people returning

home from the theatre by torchlight were surprised by a moose wandering around the town square. It's the picture-postcard Newfoundland Outpost Town, in other words, and appears in numerous films. Kevin Spacey is said to have taught Judi Dench to play pool in the local bar while filming *The Shipping News*.

What saves it from tourist tweeddom, though, is a vibrant artistic community led by people like Marieke Gow. She and her family manage many of the town's most impressive homes as holiday lets and own the Artisan Inn, where I check in for the night. She also heads up a board responsible for developing hiking on the peninsula (of which John Vivian is a key member), and has helped create a network of beautiful trails among the hills and coves around the harbour.

"Here," says Marieke, handing me a tumbler of scotch on the rocks, "I call it Twelve on Twelve: 12-year-old whisky on 12,000-year-old ice." The fragments of iceberg fizz as they melt, releasing the aeons-old air compressed within them. "You might not have seen an iceberg, but at least you can say you've drunk one."

That evening, Marieke calls in a favour with a local and decks out their beautiful A-frame boathouse with candles, so a few of us guests can watch the sunset over the waters while eating freshly-caught cod and chips. Striving for the perfect-host award, she tells me she's booked me onto a local whale-watching tour tomorrow so I can finally stop grumbling about not seeing one. Then she pulls out a violin and starts to play wistful Irish ballads. Sipping a glass of wine, with the waves lapping under the floorboards, I gently drift away with the music and don't tell her that – right now – I couldn't give a stuff about whales or icebergs. Because this is just magical. ■

WIN A TRIP TO CANADA!

Here's your chance to win a holiday for two to Newfoundland and experience the East Coast Trail for yourself, courtesy of the tourist board of Newfoundland and Labrador (www.newfoundlandlabrador.com) and the UK's leading tour operator to Canada, Canadian Affair (www.canadianaffair.com).

Atlantic Canada's towering cliffs, sea stacks, lighthouses and coves are less than six hours away by direct flight from London, and you can explore them all on this week-long holiday, including car hire.

The prize includes:

- Two return economy flights to St John's from London Gatwick with Air Transat.
- Six nights' accommodation in a three-star hotel.
- Seven days' fully inclusive car hire for one driver with Hertz.

HOW TO ENTER

Complete the entry form at www.ramblers.org.uk/walkcompetitions (where you'll also find t&cs). Closing date: 20 February 2015. The first correct entry picked at random after the closing date will win.

